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ABSTRACT

This essay interprets the dynamics of suicide based on a view of life as an autonomous process of the unfolding of genetically determined potential. The life process does not require external incentives; it depends, however, on needs-satisfying exchanges between individuals and their physical and social environment. Social orders of human groups can facilitate or obstruct these needed exchanges. Obstructions of these exchanges, and hence of the satisfaction of developmental needs, is defined as violence. Such obstructions may result from acts of individuals or from socially structured conditions. The latter form of violence is defined as "structural violence." Suicide tends to occur when individuals feel completely blocked in the unfolding of their potential as a result of structural violence. Conditions in the United States and in other capitalist societies are analyzed and are found to involve much structural violence, reflected in a high incidence of suicide. It is suggested that primary prevention of suicide requires political action toward eliminating structural violence from the social order, rather than merely professional and technical measures. (Author)

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SOCIETAL ROOTS OF VIOLENCE AND SUICIDE*

by David G. Gil, Brandeis University

Not having studied the phenomenon of suicide systematically, nor given it much thought until I was invited to this conference, I approached this discussion as a "layman" with some scholarly experience in looking critically at human phenomena from a radical and holistic perspective.

The closest I have come to exploring suicide, were occasions when I experienced frustrations and doubts as to the meaning and worth of my own existence, and had to confront the question: Is it worth carrying on? Such a low-intensity, suicidal tendency may not be unusual in the prevailing societal context, and may be one useful, existential source for gaining insights into the dynamics of this diverse and multi-dimensional phenomenon.

To make sense out of human urges, thoughts, desires and acts to terminate one's existence, one would have to comprehend the life process itself. The difficulties of that suggest that complete knowledge of the types and dimensions of suicide may not be attainable, and that we should be satisfied with approximations. The following thoughts and hypotheses are, therefore, not offered as certainties but as contributions to scholarly efforts to broaden understanding concerning the roots and dynamics of suicides, and concerning effective strategies to reduce incidence levels.

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Human life seems to be a process of unfolding of potentials inherent in our genetic material. The life force, whatever that may be, tends toward being, becoming, expression and actualization. It does not seem to require incentives from outside forces. It seems to be self-motivated, autonomous.

Yet the life process of individuals is never self-contained and self-sufficient. It can unfold only through continuous exchanges and interactions among individuals, and between them and their natural settings. With humans, the habitat includes not only the natural, physical environment, but also the human-created, culturally transmitted environment and its social and psychological dynamics.

Exchanges between organisms and their habitat are generally oriented towards continuous satisfaction of intrinsic life needs--a condition of survival, health and development. The human life process will unfold only when, and to the extent to which, interactions among humans, and between them and their environment, result in approximate satisfaction of biological, social and psychological needs, some of which are intrinsic to human nature, while others are human-created. Social orders seem to have involved out of attempts by groups of humans to create stable patterns for exchanges and interactions among themselves and with their habitats, aimed at meeting material and other needs experienced in the context of relative scarcities. Any particular social order constitutes one,

more or less adequate solution to the existential imperatives of satisfying human needs by developing, producing and distributing life-sustaining and enhancing goods, services, tasks and rights.*

Not all social orders are equally effective in meeting the needs of their members. In evaluating the performance of past and present societies, one must therefore examine the extent to which their institutions and values assure satisfaction of the developmental and existential needs of their members. In societies whose institutions and values are conducive to such need satisfaction, the life process of members is likely to unfold fully, and individuals are likely to discover, express, and actualize their inherent potentials. On the other hand, in societies whose institutions and values are not conducive to need satisfaction, the unfolding of the life process of members is inhibited and their potentials are likely to be suppressed and to remain unrealized.

Whenever free and full development of human potential is inhibited, as a consequence of structural and philosophical shortcomings of social orders, the quality of life and of human relations tends to be negatively affected. Such a deficit in the quality of life and of human relations will be reflected in developmental deficits and in physical and psychological ill health, as well as in various manifestations of social deviance. Suicidal urges, thoughts, desires and acts seem to be one response of individuals who feel irreversibly trapped by societal conditions which violate the unfolding of their life process and the development of their innate potential.

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*See the author's book Unravelling Social Policy, Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1973, 1976.

Societal institutions and values which fail to satisfy intrinsic human needs, and thus inhibit the unfolding of the life process and the actualization of human potential may be thought of as structurally violent, and suicidal tendencies, along with social deviance, developmental deficits, and ill health, may therefore be understood as inevitable consequences of, or reactions to life-negating structural violence permeating a society.

Not all incidents of actual, attempted, or intended suicide may fit the foregoing conception. I think, though, that it sheds light on a broad range of the suicide spectrum and that the effectiveness of strategies for reducing the incidence of suicide depends, therefore, on the extent to which such strategies are derived from this conception and hypothesis. From a public health perspective it would seem that effective strategies to overcome suicidal tendencies in a population would have to be political first, and professional and technical second, rather than, as is often assumed, professional and technical only. For such strategies would have to identify and transform aspects of social orders which inhibit full and free development of people and their potentials, and which violate the unfolding of the autonomous life process. To avoid misunderstanding, I wish to stress that I consider professional competence and interventions important ingredients of an effective strategy to reduce the incidence of suicides, but that these cannot attain significant results unless they are an integral part of a politically oriented strategy.

To conclude this discussion, I will briefly examine its relevance for the reality of our culture and society. The selfish, competitive and inegalitarian values which shape, and are reinforced by, prevailing capitalist institutions, are in conflict with the free unfolding of everyone's life process, and the full development and actualization of the innate potential of all members of society. It should be noted, that these dynamics, which negate and violate intrinsic human needs and capacities, affect all members of our society, be they deprived or affluent in material terms. Obviously, materially deprived individuals and groups encounter more severe obstacles to full development. Yet few among us lead truly meaningful lives, and most of us are essentially isolated and lonely, because of the competitive and exploitative dynamics of hierarchically structured organizations which treat people not as subjects, but use them as means to their ends. Few among us are self-directing and creative at work when we are "lucky to be employed," and most of us hardly use our capacities and talents at work. The prevailing organization of work and production is not concerned with human development and human needs, but is shaped primarily by profit criteria. Not surprisingly, our educational institutions prepare us to fit into the existing, alienating system of production, and are not geared to liberating and encouraging our potentials. Our human needs for meaningful and caring, reciprocal relations, and for self-actualization are usually frustrated, denied and suppressed, and we are conditioned by "education" and communications media to escape into a consumer mentality and to substitute satisfactions of artifically created needs for our genuine ones.

This brief sketch of well-documented characteristics of our society should establish the relevance of the conception of societal violence and suicide for our current existence. By stressing life-negating aspects I do not suggest that there are no life-affirming ones in our society. However, since this discussion focused on suicidal dynamics I had to emphasize life-inhibiting aspects.

If we want to reduce the incidence of suicides in our society, we need to replace currently dominant values: competition with cooperation, domination and exploitation with liberty and self-direction, inequality with equality, and selfishness and other-negating individualism with genuine individuality. And we need to transform capitalist institutions, in which people are means of production and accumulation, into libertarian-egalitarian institutions, in which all people can become masters over their own destinies. Once we move in that direction, we will have turned a corner on the road to preserve life and overcome its ultimate negation -- suicide.*

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*See the author's book, The Challenge of Social Equality, Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1976.